

Shopping for Health: Guide to Frozen Meals¹

Sarah A. Glenny and Wendy J. Dahl²

Imagine a plate of steaming spaghetti and meatballs topped with grated cheese, or perhaps grilled herb-flavored chicken with zucchini and mashed sweet potatoes. For most people, these meals might seem like a lot of work to prepare. Busy schedules, limited cooking space, or a lack of kitchen equipment may limit what you eat at meals. However, with the large variety of frozen meals that are now in grocery stores, it's possible to expand your food options and still eat tasty and healthy meals. The key is to know what to look for when you are shopping. To learn how to choose delicious meals that meet your taste preferences and your health needs, read on.

Frozen Meal Basics

The Benefits of Frozen Meals

Frozen meals are convenient and can be helpful for people who have minimal cooking skills. Also, preparing meals from scratch may be difficult for people who don't have enough cooking space or kitchen utensils. Frozen meals, however, give you the chance to enjoy a delicious meal with a minimal amount of work and time.

Another benefit of frozen meals is that freezing retains much of the food's vitamin and mineral content, so eating frozen meals on a regular basis can be healthy as long as you make good choices (1). The use of effective freezing methods helps to maintain the original texture and good taste of foods.



Figure 1. Frozen

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Frozen meals may also offer health benefits. Because frozen meals are controlled portion sizes, some brands may aid in weight management. The Dietary Guidelines 2010 recommendations for weight loss suggest that consumers “focus on the total number of calories consumed” and “monitor food intake” (2). Choosing healthy frozen meals may help

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2. Sarah A. Glenny, MS-DI student, and Wendy J. Dahl, assistant professor, Food Science and Human Nutrition Department, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611.

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consumers learn portion sizes (3). Healthy frozen meals can be used as a tool to reach weight-loss goals (3).

Frozen meals can be used to achieve nutritional goals, such as those associated with high-fiber or low-fat diets. Since the nutritional content for the entire meal is listed on the food label, you can easily check calories, fiber, fat, sodium, and other important nutrients to make sure you are staying on track.

Frozen Meals and You

Choosing the best option for you and your specific health needs is simple. Remember these three basic messages to help you select the healthiest meal for you:

1. **Choose a well-balanced meal.** Select whole grains, lean sources of protein, and plenty of fruits and vegetables. USDA's MyPlate offers a good example of how a typical plate of food should look (4).

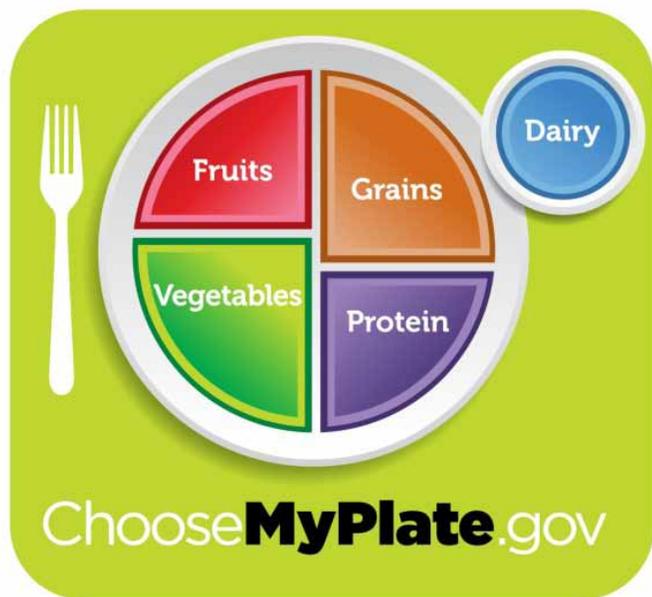


Figure 2. ChooseMyPlate.gov

Table 1. Suggested nutrient values to look for frozen meals

Nutrient on the Food Label	Suggested Amount per Meal (based roughly on a 2000 kcal diet)
Calories	250–400
Fat	5–20 g
Saturated Fat	0–7 g
Trans Fat	0 g
Fiber	2–5 g
Sodium	400–600 mg

g = grams; mg = milligrams

Many manufacturers of frozen meals offer a variety of meal options that include whole grains, lean protein sources, vegetables, and occasionally fruits.

2. **Keep your health in mind.** Many meals contain high levels of sodium and fat. Reading the food label can help you select a healthy option for your nutritional goals and needs. Keep the suggested values in mind when you select frozen meals and fat, and fiber for added nutritional benefit.

3. **Healthy eating starts with smart shopping.** Cost can be a barrier to purchasing frozen meals regularly. Using coupons and stocking up during a sale are great money-saving options.

Now It's Your Turn!

Many options can be found in stores—from vegan to Asian-inspired. Companies have researched the specific needs and preferences of consumers like you. Many companies hire a team of chefs, dietitians, and food scientists to develop their recipes. Listed below are some common brands of frozen meals.

Lean Cuisine®: This brand contains numerous lines of entrées based on taste and meal style. Most meals are around 300 calories and contain Diet Exchange values and Weight Watchers® points as listed on the package. Lean Cuisine® includes many different product lines including the Spa Collection™ and Simple Favorites™. Most of these lines contain vegetarian options.

- Selections from the Spa Collection™ include whole grains, 1 serving of a fruit or vegetable, and 3–6 grams of fiber. Examples include *Apple Cranberry Chicken*, *Hunan Stir Fry with Beef*, and *Butternut Squash Ravioli*.
- The Simple Favorites™ product line provides consumers with the chance to enjoy some of their favorite foods while staying within their desired calorie range. Examples include *Macaroni and Cheese*, *BBQ Chicken Quesadilla*, and *Swedish Meatballs with Pasta*.

Healthy Choice®: Most entrées in this brand include a lean source of protein, whole grains, a serving of vegetables, and some fiber. The variations in the entrée types are based on preparation methods and flavor preference.

- “Steaming Entrées” – Simply steam the meal in the bag. No stirring or puncturing is needed to make these products, so there are fewer steps. Examples include *Garlic Herb Shrimp*, *Chicken Romano Fresca*, and *Portabella Parmesan Risotto*.
- “Complete Meals” boasts a full serving of vegetables and a fruit-based dessert, making a complete meal. Examples include *Fajita Steak with a caramel-apple multigrain crisp* or *Golden Roasted Turkey Breast with cherry-blueberry crisp*.

Amy’s®: This brand offers vegetarian meals made with organic ingredients. The meals are labeled with symbols making it easy for consumers to spot choices that are vegan, low-fat, certified Kosher, dairy-free, soy-free, tree-nut free, or cholesterol-free. Products are divided into a variety of unique types, including the following:

- Indian dinners, such as *Mattar Paneer* and *Vegetable Korma*
- Pot pies, such as *Broccoli Pie* and *Shepherd’s Pie*
- Pocket sandwiches, such as *Cheese Pizza* or *Tofu Scramble*
- Whole meals, such as *Chili and Cornbread* or a *Southern dinner*

Many frozen meals like these are available in your grocery store. Having choices allows you to experience food with unique flavors and from different cultures that also match your dietary needs. Now that you know how to select healthier choices, all that is left to say is Bon appétit!



Figure 3. 9 Minute Pasta

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References and Resources

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Recommended Websites

University of Florida IFAS Extension EDIS - http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/topic_nutrients

The EDIS website is a comprehensive, single-source repository of all current UF/IFAS numbered peer-reviewed publications, including a large collection, sorted by topic, that provides research-based information on Health and Nutrition for consumers in Florida. Learn more about specific nutrients and making healthy food choices.